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FLEXIBLE WORKING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESSES.
Case study IBM.

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Abstract:

Previous research has suggested that flexible working has positive and negative outcomes for both employees and businesses. However, relatively little research has been conducted to reveal whether a companies flexible working options help to attain and retain staff. This study of flexible working reviews the previous research surrounding the study area and explores how flexible working affects both employees and the business of International Business Machines (IBM) UK (n = 20). It focuses on how the IT industry can use flexible working to attract and retain female talent and explores further from previous findings the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working. The study uses a qualitative and quantitative semi structured interview technique. The results reveal that females place high importance on flexible working policies when choosing to work for a company and that flexible working options increased employee perceptions of productivity. Further to this the evidence found suggests that flexible working is under promoted within the IT industry and needs greater exposure as a recruitment and staff well being tool. Findings are discussed with relation to previous studies and limitations of the current study. Practical implications of the findings are suggested and recommendations for future research are made.

Keywords: flexible working, work-life balance, IBM

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Tiivistelmä:

Aikaisempi tutkimustyö on paljastanut, että liukuvalla työajalla ja muilla liukuvilla työjärjestelyillä on positiivisia ja negatiivisia seuraamuksia. Kuitenkin vain verrattain pieni määrä tutkimusta on tehty koskien auttavatko liukuvat työjärjestelyt kun tarkoituksena on houkuttaa uutta työvoimaa yritykseen ja myös pitää kiinni nykyisistä työntekijöistä. Tämä tutkimus tutkii liukuviin työjärjestelyihin liittyviä aikaisempia tutkimuksia ja tutkii kuinka liukuvat työjärjestelyt vaikuttavat työntekijöihin ja International Business Machines (IBM):n toimintaan yrityksenä. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy siihen kuinka tietotekniikka yritykset voivat käyttää liukuvia työjärjestelyjä houkutellakseen lisää nais-työntekijöitä ja pitääkseen kiinni nykyisistä nais-työntekijöistään. Tämä tutkimus tutkii myös liukuvien työjärjestelyjen etuja ja haittoja perustuen entisiin tutkimuksiin. Tämä tutkimus käyttää kvalitatiivista ja kvantitatiivista puoli jäsenneltyä haastattelu tekniikkaa. Tulokset paljastavat että naiset arvostavat liukuvia työjärjestelyjä valitessaan yritystä johon liittyä työntekijäksi ja että liukuvat työjärjestelyt lisäsivät työntekijöiden näkemyksiä omasta tuotteliaisuudestaan. Tutkimus myös paljastaa, että liukuvia työjärjestelyjä ei mainosteta tarpeeksi tietotekniikka teollisuudessa ja että näitä järjestelyjä täytyy mainostaa enemmän rekrytoinnissa ja työntekijöiden hyvinvoinnin apuvälineenä. Löydöksiä tarkastellaan yhdessä aikaisempien tutkimusten kanssa ja suosituksia tulevaa tutkimusta varten annetaan.

Avainsanat: liukuvat työaika-järjestelyt, työn ja vapaa-ajan tasapaino, IBM

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1. Introduction

“Of all the changes in work over the last century, arguably the greatest impact upon the way work is done can be attributed to the exponential growth of flexible working patterns (Morgan, 2004, p.344). Huge technological changes, enabling people to work anytime and from anywhere, have changed our perception of where and when work takes place (Oldfield, 2008). Flexible working is a growing phenomenon, and the new flexible working legislation in the UK is set to accelerate the trend (Sparrow, 2008b, p.23).

Flexible working, by definition means: “a work practice that allows the employees a certain degree of freedom in deciding how the work will be done and how they'll coordinate their schedules with those of other employees” (BusinessDictionary.com, 2009).

Professional work is becoming increasingly more mobile due to the advances in technology and the use of communication devices such as mobile phones and laptops. These advances have enabled flexible working to evolve to its many forms and have increased its popularity among employees and employers.

The term flexible working entails numerous different working practice types. This research concentrates on the home working, mobile working and compressed hours arrangements of flexible working, excluding such flexible working arrangements as term-time, sabbaticals and annualised. All these three types of flexible working (home working, mobile working and compressed hours) are forms of teleworking. The terms telework, telecommuting, remote working, e-commuting, e-work or working from home are all work arrangements where employees can enjoy flexibility in terms of their working location and working hours (Nilles et al., 1976). The daily travel to a central place of work is replaced by telecommunication links (Baruch and Yuen, 2000).

Ever since the term flexible working first came into popular usage in the 1970's, flexible working has become an increasingly popular way for employees to work for their employing organisations (Nilles et al., 1976). There has been a remarkable increase of more than 150% in the number of employees classified as flexible workers by the Office of National Statistics between the years 1997 to 2005 (ONS, 2006). There were about 2.4 million

flexible workers in the UK in 2005, the number is significant as it is approximately 8% of all people in employment in the UK 2005 (ONS, 2006).

Flexible working is also a very current issue, as when the current economic situation in the UK continues to worsen it will lead businesses looking for ways to save costs everywhere in their operations. More and more companies, large and small, are announcing redundancies weekly, even daily. "Every day sees more layoffs and factory closures, and even skilled, committed workers are losing their jobs." (Gregory, 2008). A weak economy was behind the last major resurrection in flexible working, when power cuts forced then prime minister Edward Heath's government to impose a three-day week in the 1970s (Gregory, 2008). More than 30 years later, the history might very well re-enact itself, the economic pressures could once again drive the growth of home working or mobile desking. There are already indications that the impending recession and the cost of office space are causing organisations to cut overhead costs. A recent report by property firm Cushman & Wakefield found that a quarter of organisations are expected to reduce their office space requirements in the next year to cut costs (Sparrow, 2008b, p.23). As businesses are forced to cut back on almost everything, the introduction of a well-planned flexible working policy could help businesses to cut back costs. For companies already having a flexible working policy in place now might be the time to revisit their policy and take advantage of its full capacity as a cost saving tool.

Reasons for selecting to investigate this topic are the rising numbers of flexible workers and the implications and consequences of the current economic situation on flexible working. There is a need to further explore this in order to be able to substantiate whether this growing trend is effective and beneficial to both organisations and employees compared to more traditional work practices.

Information technology (IT) companies have led flexible working revolution (Oldfield, 2008). This is one of the reasons why this research looks into flexible working in the IT industry in the United Kingdom (UK). As a way of assessing the usage, advantages and disadvantages of flexible working in the IT industry, this research looks into the flexible working policy of International Business Machines (IBM) UK Ltd. A primary research will be carried out in a form of semi-structured interviews.

IBM is seen as a forerunner in the field of flexible working and therefore using IBM as an example company that uses flexible working is more than justified. It has been suggested that a flexible organisational culture is an explanation to why some firms are more successful than others and IBM could very well be an example of this (Peters and Waterman, 1982, cited in Daniels, Lamond and Standen, 2000).

This study assesses the advantages of flexible working for the employees using these practices and for the businesses offering the practices. The suitability of using flexible working as a business tool in helping businesses to overcome the challenges that the current economic situation brings to companies is also assessed.

The aim of this research is to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working practices in the Information Technology (IT) industry by using International Business Machines (IBM) UK Ltd. as an example company. The way we work is constantly changing, due to recession companies are cutting back office space. This research looks into the opportunities and threats of this change.

Due to confidentiality issues, this research uses IBM UK only as an example company for reflecting the current thinking regarding flexible working. Rather than investigating IBM's flexible working policies meticulously, in its primary research this research attempts to use the views IBM employees as a reflection of the views of IT professionals in the UK as a whole. However, this research only provides a subtle insight to the IT industry in the UK but at the same time it can provide an interesting addition and exploration of previous research.

This research attempts to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of flexibly working for the viewpoint of the businesses in the IT industry and for IT professionals. The possibility of the usefulness of using flexible working as a business tool in tackling challenges being faced by businesses in the IT industry will be assessed. Also, issues such as how flexibly working can be linked to the current economic situation will be highlighted in the end of this research.

This research consists of two types of research, literature review and primary research. Firstly, an extensive literature research was carried out. Based on the findings of previous studies in the field research questions were identified. A number of hypotheses were cre-

ated to help to answer the research questions. A questionnaire was then created to test out these hypotheses.

As the **core research question** for this research was identified the following question:

a) What are the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working? What are the challenges associated to flexible working and what does this mean to businesses?

The two other research questions that link to the core research question are:

b) Does flexible working help women achieve better work-life balance?

d) Can flexible working practices help businesses to survive the current economic situation?

2. International Business Machines (IBM) UK Ltd.

The company which became IBM was founded in 1896 as the Tabulating Machine Company in Endicott, New York. It was incorporated as Computing Tabulating Recording Corporation (C-T-R) on June 16, 1911 went on to become IBM (IBM International Business Machines) (IBM, 2008).

IBM has been conducting business in the field of information handling for nearly 100 years. Almost all of IBM's products were "designed and developed to record, process, communicate, store and retrieve information - from its first scales, tabulators and clocks to today's powerful computers and vast global networks" (IBM, 2008).

In 1989 IBM began its involvement in the IT industry when IBM and Eastman Kodak agreed for IBM to design, build and manage a data centre in New York. This experience encouraged IBM to provide other outsourcing services to companies by utilizing the additional capacity in IBM's own data centres. (IBM, 2008).

Today IBM has assets totalling \$120.4 billion, a net income of \$10.4 billion and employs 386,558 people based in over 170 countries, with 28 locations in the UK alone (IBM, 2009). IBM's business character is based upon 3 core values:

- Dedication to every client's success
- Innovation that matters – for our company and for the world
- Trust and personal responsibility in all relationships

The latter value contributing to the IBM's flexible working policy for its employees, whereby flexible working requires employers to have trust in their employees.

Literature review

3. Flexible working policy at IBM UK

In many companies changes in their flexible working policies are driven by legislation, but forward-thinking employers, such as IBM, are proactive in embracing the concepts of flexibility as a means of ensuring the long term competitiveness of their organisations (Meredith, 2005). Innovative companies across the world have reshaped the working week to suit the demands for their staff a long time ago (Oldfield, 2008), these companies have not been waiting to be told about the benefits of flexible working (Morgan, 2008). IBM is a prime example of this kind of organisational behaviour.

As per IBM's flexible working policy, IBM is committed to creating a supportive flexible work environment, allowing employees more flexibility and control over how, where and when their work gets done (IBM, 2009b). The previously mentioned new UK government legislation has not had an effect on IBM UK as the company already offers flexible working to all of its employees (IBM, 2009). Flexible working options offered by IBM UK include annualised, term-time and compressed hours, job share, sabbaticals, and mobile and home working. IBM believes these options retain key staff (Wilson, 2008). (Please see Appendix 1 for the definitions of the different flexible working types IBM UK offers to its employees).

IBM embraces a flexible working culture with 30% of their employees working away from the office on a day to day basis, and 25% of the IBM UK workforce is designated to no specific office space (IBM 2007). This means IBM employees are able to work from any location, whether it is IBM location, home, hotel, transport etc. IBM employees are able to connect to the IBM network from everywhere where there is an Internet connection. Office space is used inefficiently. At the most obvious level, offices are hardly used at all overnight, at weekends or on public holidays.” (Brown, 1995).

IBM has been seen as a forerunner for flexible working for a long time. Brown (1995) wrote 14 years ago that “IBM once had 1,100 desks in 270,000 sq.ft. of office space on London's South Bank. It lost 50 people and introduced desk sharing, it now has 67 desks in

180,000 sq.ft. The saving in rent - translated straight to the bottom line - is 2m a year. Overall, IBM has cut its office occupation costs by 40% over the past 3 years. Also, the amount of personal storage space available to employees was one of the mandatory property cost reductions IBM UK did a long time ago (Brown, 1995). IBM has turned passive, expensive property occupation into a process-driven business requiring careful management.

“While many of us can only dream about choosing where we want to work and for how long, for employees at IBM the choice comes as standard”. Anouska Wilson, IBM's flexible working programme manager, says in an interview with Anon (2004). Wilson explains that the advantages of the extensive flexible working programme are twofold and have helped IBM adapt to both changing customer and to employee demands. What clients are expecting these days out in the marketplace have changed and flexible working help to tackle this problem. There is no longer necessarily a nine-to-five structure in the marketplace, says Wilson. If you look at the very fabric of the business and what IBM is all about, it's all about its people. One of IBM's core values is around trust in our employees and in our relationships (Anon, 2004). However, Wilson does admit that implementing the scheme did not go without its difficulties. Such difficulties include myths such as “idea that flexible working is only available for women with children and that employees who choose to work flexibly will jeopardise their career progression” (Anon, 2004). The myths surrounding flexible working are discussed in a later chapter of this research.

In the war for talent IT solutions firm IBM uses work-life balance arrangements to compete (Wilson, 2008). Anouska Wilson states that the average length of service at IBM is 11 years (Anon, 2004). Wilson believes this has helped IBM to retain a valued skills base. For the business, it is very valuable because you have an enormous set of acquired skills that can be deployed (Anon, 2004). Wilson also states that the value of the company and employee's perceived value of themselves in the company, along with their productivity goes up (Anon, 2004). In her own article, Wilson states that as well as giving employees more control over managing their life outside work, it also has benefits for IBM in terms of increased loyalty (Wilson, 2008). Further to this Wilson believes that working flexibly in a client-facing role has not impaired career progression either. Employees have been promoted while working on these reduced hours (Wilson, 2008).

Hot-desking is based on improved telecommunications and computing technology and it can increase departmental efficiency. And the loss of space reduces internal rents charged by the property department” (Brown, 1995). Brown (1995) also reveals that when IBM moved to hot-desking (meaning employees no longer have designated desks) it did not go without costs. IBM carefully studied each business group’s desk usage every half an hour; this helped them to understand the pattern of usage (Brown, 1995). This is an important aspect for any company to keep in mind when considering moving towards hot-desking. Despite the possible positive outcomes it is not always necessarily cheap, easy or quick.

Another important thing for businesses to bear in mind is that when IBM first introduced its extensive flexible working policy it could have gone either way. It always involves a high risk when introducing a completely new way for employees to work. In addition, investments on technology enabling remote working is also expensive. There are also the risks of risking employees feeling alienated from their teams and without well-planned managing of flexible working the flexible working policies can also be misused by certain individuals. These disadvantages of flexible working will be discussed more in a depth in a later chapter of this research.

4. Flexible working

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, has claimed that by the year 2050, 50 percent of the working population will operate from the home workspace (Handy, 2001, p.114, cited in Morgan, 2004, p.346). In the current economic downturn this estimate looks quite accurate. There are many factors indicating this, such as “ICT developments, the importance and value of rapid information dissemination and responsiveness, corporate restructuring and downsizing initiatives, increased marketplace competition and global market expansion, and limited concentration of qualified staff in a single location” (Morgan, 2004, p.347).

Employers are starting to understand the numerous benefits of employing flexible workers. Flexible working can be seen as a strategy for organisations to reduce real estate costs, for

example, the article 'New Ways' to work (1999, cited in Ward and Shabha, 2001), states that a typical office space is underused. The article indicates that the average employee desk space occupancy is less than 40% as a result of employee lateness, meeting customers or illness and lunch hours. This wastage is enhanced further by the running cost of PC's, cabling and in house telecommunication systems. Ward and Shabha (2001) have shown that by employing flexible workers the savings made as a result of property reduction can be sufficient to pay for new technology, employ on additional employees as well as supporting them in their home.

However, the UK trails behind other European countries when it comes to flexible working. Just 20 per cent of UK companies offer flexi-time compared with 90 per cent in Germany, 94 per cent in Sweden and 92 per cent in Finland (Oldfield, 2008). In April 2008 a new government flexible working legislation came into force enabling an extra 4.5 million people in the UK to access to flexible working arrangements (Brockett, 2008, p.7). The new legislation allows all parents of children aged up to 16 years old the right to request flexible working from their employers (Brockett, 2008, p.7). However, not all companies feel that flexible working is having a positive impact in their business. In 2005, UK's employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), found that the proportion of employers in the UK who believe that flexible working is "having a negative impact on their business" had more than doubled from the previous year (Morgan, 2005).

"The UK has much to do to encourage balance between work and family commitments." (Hanson, 2007, p.53). "In a skills-starved, knowledge economy, only the most short-termist, inflexible employers would remain unmoved by the arguments for remodelling the workplace" (Hanson, 2007, p.50). Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) claims that we are still thinking too traditionally in the UK and the old ways of doing things do not work in this world. More creativity, innovation and responsiveness to changes in the work place are needed (Hanson, 2007, p.53).

4.1. Advantages of flexible working

There is extensive research showing the numerous benefits of flexible working. Morgan (2004, p.345) believes that at its best, flexible working from an business point of view is about maximising all available resources and meeting the needs of employees, all at the

same time. As the labour market is constantly changing and employees also want different things from their work, the importance of a company offering flexible working grows by the day). Implementing flexible working policies can mean that organisations are able to source skilled staff from another locality and also develop more opportunities for workers taking up a role they would not be able to take up without the flexible working option (Morgan, 2004, p.348). This enables the business to choose from a larger pool of talent and diversify its employee base.

In their book Stredwick and Ellis (2005) state that “capitalising on the 24- hour economy often requires services to be provided when customers want them, not just when it is convenient to the provider. Dealing with peaks and troughs of demand becomes more manageable, and access is opened up to new labour markets where traditional working patterns cannot be contemplated.” According to Sparrow (2008b, p.24) flexible working will transform from being seen as a family-friendly employee benefit to a business and productivity friendly strategy.

Jackie Orme, Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) chief executive states, that all evidence shows that flexible working is good for employers and employees alike. Part-time and flexible workers are happier, more engaged and therefore more likely to perform better (Brockett, 2008, p.7). Dr Kelliher (cited in Morgan, 2008) insists that all research shows positive gains in employee performance as a result of flexible working. However, there is research showing that in the contrary to the statements of Jackie Orme and Dr Kelliher there are disadvantages associated to flexible working and these disadvantages will be discussed at a later stage of this chapter.

“Employees become super-employees when you can meet their personal needs” (Morgan, 2008). Flexible working improves retention, which has an impact on the bottom line. (Hanson, 2008). Flexible working can bring big savings to companies. Sun Microsystems saved real estate costs of \$69 million through a telework program (Arnold, 2006). The economic case for companies to embrace a teleworking philosophy seems inarguable. In addition, teleworking allows companies to base employees in previously impractical areas and open access to new markets. This geographical advantage is essential if companies are to compete in the competitive global marketplace (Ward and Shabha, 2001). Traditional offices are becoming the workspaces of the past. The cost of providing the average UK employee with desk-based facilities costs the employer on average £6,000 every year and

workspace is used on average for less than 40 percent of working time (Morgan, 2004, p.347).

Through flexible working practices commuting times and associated costs can be reduced or eliminated (Morgan, 2004, p.349). Flexible working can also bring environmental benefits. When employees do not need to travel to the office anymore this reduces their carbon footprint. Flexible working, especially mobile working and flexible hours, allows services to be made available to customers outside “normal” office hours and this way improving the level of customer service (Morgan, 2004, p.348). This benefit can bring an important competitive advantage to a business.

However, there are also disadvantages to flexible working and these will be discussed in the next chapter.

4.2. Disadvantages of flexible working

Flexible working does bring challenges to organisations as well as advantages. Organisations may need to bring in new systems for monitoring and performance management (Stredwick and Ellis,2005). The issues on monitoring flexible employees are discussed at a later stage on this research.

“Various pressures exist that stimulate firms to evaluate their policies towards flexible working practices and while most are generic, many are specific to industry and sectoral differences, these contextual forces should be considered in the move towards developing flexible working methods” (Morgan, 2004, p.347).

Acceptance of too many requests may be regarded as generous, for instance, but would it then make the business more difficult to run (Livingstone and Ogilvie 2009, p. 15). In addition, employers will need to reconsider IT requirements: flexible schemes generally lead to less face-to-face contact, and, therefore, effective communication is vital (Livingstone and Ogilvie, 2009, p. 15).

There are drawbacks that can arise from implementing flexible working programs, most significantly when flexible working has been implemented either inappropriately or where the flexibility offered is not suitable to particular job requirements (Morgan, 2004, p.349).

It is important that colleagues and employers maintain relationships with each other (Williams, 2008). The problem that flexible working might create is that it might be more difficult to have effective teams that deliver according to schedule when people work at different hours and different locations.

According to research by Keller E.L. and Moen P. (2007, p. 491) it seems that schedule control is a crucial mediator between organisational context and individual work-family conflict. One of the objectives of flexible working is to make the employee feel like he/she is in charge of his/her own schedule control. If this does not happen, the business's flexible working practice objective has failed.

Specific aspects about the advantage and disadvantages of flexible working will be discussed more in-depth in the following chapters.

5. Can flexible working help IT businesses attract more female talent?

The Information Technology (IT) industry is dynamic and ever changing, businesses operating in this industry have to be constantly developing new innovative products and solutions for their customers and for doing this they need the best talent. Attracting and retaining highly skilled IT professionals has been a difficult task for IT managers since the early 1980s (Beasley *et al*, 2001, p. 477). Demand for IT workers with skills in specific areas is driving employers to compete with one another to show that they offer the best working environment. As a result, those pressures are leading employers to redefine flexible working conditions (Hoffman, 2008). Expectations among IT executives that IT workers will put in long hours at the office are “pretty much gone” (Hoffman, 2008). Another problem faced by IT companies is how to attract and retain female employees? This research assesses whether flexible working arrangements could offer a solution to tackle this long-standing issue faced by IT companies.

IT companies tend to have a male dominated workforce. Women represent more than 50 per cent of the world’s population, but they’re not 50 per cent of the IT companies’ workforce and certainly have not achieved parity in the management and executive teams (Childs, 2005, p.75). With male dominated workforce it is difficult to reflect the market place and customers.

With many women still feeling they have to choose between a career or a family, businesses are missing out on potential stars (Craig, 2008, p.32). If IT companies are able to attract more female talent this means are able to choose from a larger pool of talent and get variety of skills into their business. If businesses wish to remain successful they must be committed in ensuring that workforce diversity (including gender diversity) is part of their day-to-day business conduct (Childs, T. E., 2005, p. 73). An understanding of the similarities and differences between men and women in terms of how they perceive their own professional and domestic roles is an important tool for information technology (IT) managers who wish to attract and retain highly-skilled and sought after IT professionals (Beasley *et al*, 2001, p. 478). Traditionally, men have been the primary financial providers for their families, while women have been the primary care-givers (Beasley *et al*, 2001, p. 478). Technology company IBM recognises that women bring different skills and strengths to

the work environment which complements those offered by men. The result is strong teamwork (IBM, 2009b). There are various levels of diversity groups in place to promote women's issues in the workplace at IBM, such as Women in Blue (IBM's internal networking group for women) and UK Women's Leadership Team (IBM, 2009b). These are all clear indications on how IBM has recognised the need to attract to women.

The findings by Labour Force Survey revealed that there was a 3 % decline in the number of women working in IT in 2002-2003 (cited in Anon, 2004b, p.4). IT companies should consider the reasons behind this fall. Every time a well-trained woman leaves, a company wastes time and money on recruitment and training. Yet, offering a woman with children greater choice over working hours could stop women leaving, save the company money and mean she can carry on enjoying a good career (Anon, 2004b). Anon (2004b) claims flexible working offers a "win-win" situation, for the company and for the employee. Senior IT employers should give greater commitment to the work-life balance agenda from the top down, to reverse the downward trend in women working in IT (Anon, 2004b).

"Traditional ways of working – long, inflexible working – assume people do not have caring responsibilities. They are particularly detrimental to women, who often care for a parent or a child. Flexibility tackles some of the practical barriers to women's advancement and, if handled right, can lead to a dramatic rise in the number of women managers (Walters, 2007).

Women's rights campaign group the Fawcett Society says there needs to be "wholesale transformation" in the workplace, with a push towards extending flexible working and childcare arrangements (Craig, 2008, p.32). Discriminatory attitudes must be challenged, all roles are made flexible at every level, and long working hours culture must be got rid of (Craig, 2008, p.32). Women should not think that 'the game is up' in terms of having both a career and a family, and it is really up to employers to ensure that it is possible. (Craig, 2008, p.32). An effective way for supporting women is through flexible working (Hanson, 2007, p.53).

The UK government's sufficiently concerned to weigh in with a heavy endorsement of flexible working (Hanson, 2007, p.51). Creating more quality part-time roles is key to increasing the number of women in senior roles, which can extend a company's portfolio of

skills, provide role models for younger, high-potential women and place companies closer to their customer base (Hanson, 2007, p.51).

Most working mothers are still frustrated by the lack of flexible working options available for them (Williams, 2008). According to research by the job site Workingmums.co.uk 73 percent of working mothers believed the lack of appropriate flexible work was the biggest barrier to their returning to work (Williams, 2008). Improving the retention rates of working mums can help to reduce staff turnover and recruitment costs (Williams, 2008). This is the reason why it is absolutely essential for companies to try and reduce this retention and retain these highly-skilled and experienced employees. “Women would be more loyal and “go the extra mile” for an organisation that offered flexible work arrangements” (Anon, 2007). Organisations can benefit significantly by encouraging the use of benefits by both women and men (Anon, 2007

“When introducing flexible working policies, many organisations make the mistake of launching them from a family-friendly platform. If the focus is on women returning from maternity leave, it is seen as a perk for lucky few, or a soft option for those who are not committed to their career. Both the women and the policy become stigmatised and get pushed to the margins. Work-life balance initiative should be launched from a diversity platform rather than family-friendly platform” (Walters, 2007, p.14). Flexible working can help both men and women with combating stress, religious obligations, study and self-development (Walters, 2007, p.14). According to Oldfield (2008) flexible working is all about staff retention, especially from a gender perspective. However, Oldfield (2008) believes that flexible working arrangements should not be gender specific. She believes flexible working should be done by all and taken up by all.

Because of this old conception women are still struggling to balance their lives between family and work. Without extensive, well-planned flexible working policies, companies are risking talented women not returning from their maternity leaves or taking up more challenging roles. This research assesses the usefulness of using flexible working practices as a business tool in attracting and retaining female employees.

These findings are supported further by Caroline Gatrell’s research. Gatrell found that part-time working is career-limiting for women (because employers see it as connected to family responsibilities and an indication of a lack of commitment to work) but, conversely,

career- enhancing for men (who often want to flex their hours to take on a position on the board) (Sparrow, 2008b, p.25)

When developing strategies to reduce employee turnover, balancing work and family plays a large role in these strategies (Deery, 2008). According to Deery (2008) work-life balance issues play an important role in an employee's decision to stay or leave an organisation.

If businesses do not want to miss out on these potential stars now might be the time to start considering all possible roles flexible, even going as far as making the management / director roles part-time. Since men and women often perceive their professional and domestic roles and responsibilities differently, more flexible working arrangements, which permit them to accomplish these roles and responsibilities in a more satisfactory manner, can be an important motivation for accepting and remaining in a given IT position (Beasley *et al*, 2001, p.478).

However, it is not only the business that needs to adapt. Working parents (women and men) need to make sure they have a realistic plan for combining their work life with their personal life to make sure they can do their role accordingly.

Based on the previous research it is hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 1

Flexible working can be used as a business tool in attracting and retaining female employees.

Hypothesis 2

Flexible working helps women to achieve better work-life balance.

Hypothesis 3

Flexible working policy is a reason for employees to stay or join a company.

6. Management views towards flexible working

IT workers are demanding better work-life balance but more than half of those working in the sector do not believe senior managers are leading by example. This was one of the findings in a report that looked at flexible working across the IT industry, which was prepared for the Department of Trade and Industry and the Intellect Women in IT Forum by consultants Flexexecutive, and surveyed 1,000 IT professionals (Anon, 2004b).

Kelly and Moen (2007, p. 489) state that employees believe using flexible work arrangements will stall their careers and signal to management that they are not committed to the organisation. This happens especially when performance review systems have not been updated to advise managers how to evaluate workers using these arrangements (Kelly, E.L. and Moen P., 2007, p. 489). In such environment the usage of flexible working will likely to be low, with “men especially avoiding or hiding their use” (Kelly, E.L. and Moen P., 2007, p. 489).

Managers see some jobs and some employees as unsuited to flexible arrangements (Kelly, E.L. and Moen P., 2007, p. 489). This is further supported by Morgan (2004, p.349), in his research he found that challenge associated to flexible working can be sceptical managers. Managers can find managing, coordinating and controlling flexible workers more difficult than managing “regular employees” (Morgan, 2004, p. 349). Managers might also dismiss the possibility of flexible working themselves and potentially transfer their perceptions to their subordinates (Morgan, 2004, p. 349). One difficulty for managers can also be how to trust that the flexible workers are doing their work accordingly (Morgan, 2004, p. 349). For all of these reasons, managers are tempted to limit access to flexible work arrangements, minimise the changes that really occur under the new arrangements, and continue to reward employees who work in the traditional manner (Kelly, E.L. and Moen P., 2007, p. 489). These management attitudes limit the schedule control that employees experience and therefore undermine any potential benefits of these policies to employees, their families, and their organizations (Kelly, E.L. and Moen P., 2007, p. 489). If it is the case that managers managing flexible employees is in fact more difficult the reason for this could be that the managers have not been trained on how to manage flexible employees. If the management is trained accordingly it might help to overcome the resistance towards flexible

working and help to create a more positive attitude towards flexible working among the management. If the management attitudes change this in turn might have a positive impact on the employee fear that flexible working might have a negative impact on their career progress. This issue is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Flexible working policies need to be managed, maintained, reviewed and invested in (Morgan, 2004, p.349). Naturally, managers need to learn to manage flexible workers; to manage flexible workers successfully is to measure the work outputs rather than the process (Morgan, 2004, p. 349).

This is further supported by Sparrow (2008a, p.26), she states that Human Resources (HR) needs to train managers to manage flexible workers.

Based on the previous research it is hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 4

Managers are reluctant to encourage their employees to work flexibly.

7. Flexible working career implications

In her article Louisa Peacock (2008, p.1) examined a study conducted by a charity Working Families, in association with Cranfield School of Management. This research, Flexible Working and Performance study, studied 3,500 UK employees and revealed that “people are not taking up the right to request flexible working for fear it will damage their career progress. The research found that many employees felt that operating remotely or on reduced hour’s basis meant being excluded from promotion opportunities (Peacock, 2008, p.1). According to Peacock (2008, p.1) promotions are still offered to office-based employees over those on flexible working arrangements, this comes from an old-fashioned assumption by managers that it is easier to do this than having to think about rescheduling work.

Another research with similar finding is a survey by Department of Trade and Industry and the Intellect Women in IT Forum. They surveyed 1,000 IT professionals and found out that nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) fear that moving to a part-time or flexible career will harm their promotional prospects (Anon, 2004b, p.4). This could link to the findings by the research mentioned in an earlier chapter, the Labour Force Survey which revealed that there were a 3 per cent decline in the number of women working in IT in 2002-2003 (Anon, 2004b, p.4)..

According to Sparrow (2008a, p.24) if people's jobs are endangered, they are less likely to want to be out of sight, out of mind. Due to the worsening economic situation, this problem can be expected grow.

Based on the previous research it is hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 2

People do not use flexible working arrangements because they are scared of the impact on career progress.

8. *The productivity of employees*

In their book Stredwick and Ellis (2005) state that although the British workers work the longest working hours in Europe, British levels of productivity are lower than in many other countries, and “the loss of working time through stress costs British businesses over £12 billion per year”.

A solution for this problem could be found in the research by Morgan (2004, p.348). Morgan found that the ability to work flexibly results in better staff productivity and performance. This is further suggested based on research by Stredwick and Ellis (2005). Stredwick and Ellis found that flexible working can stimulate higher job satisfaction and commitment levels for employees, where they can see a clear personal benefit from the change. Their research also revealed that flexible workers feel that they “achieve far more in flexible mode than they ever did before as nine-to-five-ers”. (Also, the UK government has made it clear that it supports the move to more flexible working practices (Stredwick and Ellis, 2005).)

To further enhance this, Hanson (2008) found that due to flexible working employees are more motivated and this leads them to do better jobs and productivity increases. There is also another business benefit to this: the employer brand is enhanced as employees who enjoy working for the company will tell their friends and this way the company attracts other skilled employees (Hanson, 2008).

However it could be argued that flexible working does not suit all employees and, for these employees working flexibly might leave them feeling isolated and might in fact lead to a decrease in their productivity.

Morgan (2004, p.349) claims that information access and exchange are the main problems associated with flexible working. This naturally is a major challenge for any company. It is a major disadvantage to a company if the flow of information suffers. Face to face meetings become more scarce and employees working from home or a client site might feel alienated from the team and the interaction and communication within the team deteriorates.

Based on the previous research it is hypothesised that.

Hypothesis 6

Flexible working helps employees to be more productive.

Hypothesis 7

Flexible working leaves employees feeling alienated from their teams.

9. Methodology

9.1. Participants

Please see Appendix 2.

9.2. Procedure

Primary research was conducted to test whether the previous findings by other researchers would be supported and further developed. 20 minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, by asking them questions from a questionnaire. The questionnaire questions were developed to investigate and further the findings of previous research, see literature review. The aim of the questionnaire was to answer the research questions hypothesised.

Semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire were used to increase the response rate and avoid misunderstandings of questions. Interviews were also used to note any additional comments that participants deemed relevant to working flexibly during the questionnaire. All questions were explained by the interviewer. An additional set of questions were asked to the managers in order to understand management attitudes towards employees using flexible working options.

9.3. Limitations of the approach taken

The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees: some are work colleagues with which the interviewer has daily interaction and with some participants the interviewer has only occasional interaction. This may have had an affect to the research results.

The interviews were conducted at an IBM premise, this factor of location may have had a unconsciously/consciously biased the participant responses as they felt under pressure to

answer questions with a response that would be deemed the norm or appropriate, whilst in their organisational environment.

Using a semi structured interview technique could lead to interviewer bias or the interviewer recording some discussion data and missing other data, which may have affected the results. Due to time constraints no more than 20 participants could be interviewed, this may mean the relatively small sample size might not be large enough to generalise the results to an organisation employing 138,558 people. Further to this some questions could not be asked because of company confidentiality matters.

10. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

In this section the hypotheses that were set out at an earlier stage of this research are tested. Please see Appendix 3 for the complete questionnaire.

As the core research question of this research is **what are the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working**, the first two tables in the findings section show the employee perceptions on the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working.

Q: What do you feel are biggest advantages of flexible working?

Reason why use flex work?	Participants N 20
a) Family reasons	7 (35%)
b) Caring for the elderly	
c) More productive	16 (80%)
d) Manage stress	5 (25%)
e) Reduce travel time	5 (25%)
f) Other	3 (15%)

16 (80%) of the participants indicated that the biggest advantage of flexible working is to be more productive, 7 (35%) indicated family reasons (work-life balance), 5 (25%) indicated managing stress, 5 (25%) indicated the reduction of the travel time and 3(15%) indicated other reasons.

Please see Appendix 4 for the disadvantages of flexible working.

Hypothesis 1

Flexible working can be used as a business tool for attracting and retaining female employees.

Q: How important is it to you that a company has an extensive flexible working policy?

	Male	Female
a) Not important		1(9%)
b) A little		
c) Neither imp or not	1(11%)	
d) Important	1 (11%)	2 (18%)
e) Very important	6 (67%)	8(73%)
f) N/A	1(11%)	

No significant difference was found between the importance male and female participants place on a company having a flexible working policy, this would mean that a company having a flexible working policy is almost as important to females and males.

Q: What types of flexible working do you make use of?

	Male	Female
Compressed Hours		2(18%)
Working From Home	9(100%)	11(100%)
Mobile Working	9(100%)	11(100%)

Females were the only employees to use the flexible working schedule compressed hours, which allows employees to work less days a week with more hours in the day on work days. This is a possible benefit to work-life balance. Table also shows that all employees interviewed, regardless of gender, used mobile and home working flexible schedules.

Which shows that employees do take advantage of flexible work options available for them.

Q: How often do you use flexible working?

Mobile Working	Male	Female
a) 1 a week	1(11%)	2(18%)
b) 2- 3 times a week	4(44%)	2(18%)
c)4- 5 times a week	3(33%)	2(18%)
d)twice a month		2(18%)
e) once every 3 weeks		1 (9%)
f) once a month		1(9%)
g) 1 every 3 months	1(11%)	1(9%)

Home Working	Male	Female
a) 1 a week	1(11%)	3(27%)
b) 2- 3 times a week	2(22%)	2(18%)
c)4- 5 times a week		1(9%)
d)twice a month	4(44%)	2(18%)
e) once every 3 weeks		
f) once a month	4(44%)	1(9%)
g) 1 every 3 months	1(11%)	2(18%)

One female indicated that she used compressed hours 2-3 times a week and one female indicated that she used compressed hours 4-5 times a week.

The findings of this research indicate that although no significant difference can be seen between the amount males and females use home and mobile working, the tables do show that both home and mobile working are utilised predominantly at least once week by both males and females which further supports that employees use flexible work options if they are available to them.

Hypothesis 3

An extensive flexible working policy is a reason for employees to stay with or join a company.

Q: Is a flexible working policy a reason for you to stay with or join a company?

	Male	Female
Yes	6(67%)	10(91%)
No	1(11%)	
No difference	2(22%)	1(9%)

Responses of all participants:

	Participant N20
Yes	16(80%)
No	1(5%)
No difference	3(15%)

16 out of 20 of the participants (80%) stated that an extensive flexible working policy is a reason for them to stay with or join a company, only 1 out of 20 stated it was not (5%). 3 participants said it does not make any difference to them whether or not a company has an extensive flexible working policy.

When comparing the results of men and women, 91 % of the female respondents felt that extensive flexible working policy is a reason for them to stay with or join a company, whilst only 67% of the male respondents felt the same. This suggests that women may place more importance on a company's flexible working policy when looking to join or stay with a company which was suggested by Williams (2008).

Hypothesis 2

Flexible working helps women to achieve better work-life balance.

Q: Reasons why you use flexible working?

Reason why use flex work?	Male	Female
a) Family reasons	3(33%)	4(36%)
b) Caring for the elderly		
c) More productive	9 (100%)	7(64%)
d) Manage stress		5(45%)
e) Reduce travel time	8(89%)	7(64%)
f) Other	3(33%)	

4 (36%) of the female participants indicated family reasons as for the reason to use flexible working. This percentage is comparatively high and it would indicate that flexible working may help women achieve better work-life balance.

Hypothesis 4

People do not use flexible working because they are scared of the impact on career progress.

Hypothesis 5

Managers are reluctant to encourage the employees to work flexibly.

Please see Appendix 4.

Hypothesis 6

Flexible working makes employees more productive.

Q: Do you feel the ability to work flexibly has increased your productivity?

	Participants N20
a) Yes, a large amount	14(70%)
b) Yes, a small amount	6 (30%)
c) No impact	
d) Decreased/decreases	
e) N/A	

14 out of 20 participants (70%) indicated that the ability to work flexibly has increased their productivity a large amount and 6 out of 20 (30%) indicated it had increased their productivity by small amount. Based on these results it is clear that the employees feel that flexible working has increased their productivity. This is encouraging for companies deliberating whether or not to implement flexible working as a part of their overall work strat-

egy. These findings however, only indicate that employees perceive that working flexibly has increased their productivity; it would be useful to further this research to objectively measure employee's productivity. For example by comparing sales figures of an office bound employee and a flexible worker with the same job title.

This supports the findings by Hanson (2008) that found that due to flexible working employees are more motivated and this leads them to do better jobs and productivity increases.

Hypothesis 7

Flexible working leaves employees feeling alienated from their teams.

Please see Appendix 4.

Other findings

Please see Appendix 5.

11. Conclusions

There are employee level and business level advantages to flexible working. Based on the primary and secondary research it is clear that if implemented accordingly forms of flexible working can have a very positive impact on both the individual and the organisation. As it has become clear from this research that flexible working is increasing, “various pressures exist that stimulate firms to evaluate their policies towards flexible working practices and while most are generic, many are specific to industry and sectoral differences, these contextual forces should be considered in the move towards developing flexible working methods” (Morgan, 2004, p.347). It has been employees find the fact that a company has an extensive flexible working policy important when finding a place to work.

With the current precarious economic climate flexible working may also be a way to save jobs and if employees were offered flexible working arrangements as an alternative to made redundant it is highly likely that a large proportion of the employees would go for the first choice. With job losses as a clear alternative, flexible working is a positive outcome (Gregory, 2008). With scope for creativity in working patterns, employees might opt for working reduced hours, different hours or sharing jobs and some might even welcome career breaks. Different set hours might even help companies to spread their resources (Gregory, 2008).

However, there are some disadvantages to flexible working as well such as businesses losing some of the control over what their employees are doing in their working time and that some forms of flexible working, e.g. home working, do not suit all employees. Also, the perceived costs of establishing and managing a flexible working program can be high and not all jobs lend themselves easily to flexible working such as daily client facing roles. Further to this the potential isolation and team alienation that this research highlights can become a factor in flexible working needs to be managed with regular face to face meetings. Another challenge that flexible working brings to businesses has to do with how to monitor and assess flexible workers. Assessing employees needs to move more towards assessing the results of the employees rather than the hours spent in the office.

As made reference to earlier there were some limitations to this research, due to confidentiality issues certain questions which would have been beneficial for the research could not be asked from the target group.

The future prospects for employees are that employees need to learn to self manage their working days. It is highly likely to that the face-to-face communications will be scarcer in the work place of the future.

What companies need at the moment are talented, motivated and loyal employees to help them get through the tough times. Employees will probably need to work extra hard but it is clear that employees do expect to get something back from the company as well. If they don't get what they want, they will go to someone who will give them what they want. The times have changed, it is time for a new working culture, which no doubt has its dangers but as this research shows, if planned thoroughly and implemented smartly the investment to the policy will pay off.

If a business were to undertake the challenge of implementing flexible working practice, the important thing for all businesses to bear in mind is finding the right balance with the freedom given to the employees and securing adequate control of working activities. Based on my literature research and primary research it has become clear that as organisational structures are changing, businesses need to accommodate for the needs to the employees if the it wants to have an extensive portfolio of employees with a wide variety of varying skills, a workforce that reflects the marketplace and more productive, effective and happier employees.

With an extensive flexible working policy a company can employ people it might have otherwise lost and an extensive working policy can attract skilled employees who might not have chosen the company otherwise. Also, loosing staff due to the inability to offer them what they need to balance their work-life with other commitments in their life, has hidden costs to it, such as the loss of intellectual property (Hanson, 2008).

For years employers have used flexible working patterns to attract and keep skilled employees by relieving the pressure on their home lives. Now it is highly likely that flexible working might offer a way of reducing overall costs while keeping them in work (Gregory,

2008). In the times of recession flexible working might also be a key in helping businesses to get through the tough times.

“You could argue that if you have more committed employees, one of the prime benefits of flexible working, you are better positioned to compete in a difficult market” (Gregory, 2008). However, the danger is that will any of us actually go into the office to work in 20 years' time, or will we all be working remotely (Sparrow, 2008b, p.23)? In the current situation, where companies are trying to save as much money as possible by “making” their employees to work from home, there are dangers to this. This can lead to serious problems inside the firm and it can deteriorate the communication within the company significantly. This of course would affect other companies more than others, depending on their line of business.

All in all, “regardless of gender, it is clear that both men and women must balance the demands of work and family, demands which can be quite stressful (Beasley *et al*, 2001, p.478).

11.1. Practical implications

Employers may be able to use findings of this study in the recruitment of the female talent within the IT industry and should look at the positive employee feedback regarding flexible working as a potential further develop flexible working strategies to satisfy employee's and maintain and improve job satisfaction, which in turn has positive implications for the company in question.

Further to this the findings that employees feel that working flexibly has improved their productivity should be of serious consideration to companies looking to gain competitive advantage in this difficult economic client. With employees working more productively and the potential real estate savings made by flexible working, employers should seriously consider moving to a flexible workforce.

11.2. Recommendations for future research

It would be useful to conduct further research to this study with a larger sample size of participants to ensure all findings can be generalised to large multi national companies such as IBM, further to this it would be useful to conduct research on various different IT companies and compare the results to see if the findings of this study are IBM specific or are a general indication of flexible working in the IT industry.

Future research should also expand on the findings of this study which suggest that flexible working increases employee productivity. Although as previously highlighted objective measures of productivity should be used to ensure that it is not only the perceptions of productivity that increased by flexible working.

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